

The Combined Action Program Revisited

EWS 2005

Subject Area Strategic Issues

The Combined Action Program Revisited
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to
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8 February 2005

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 08 FEB 2005		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2005 to 00-00-2005	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Combined Action Program Revisited				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) United States Marine Corps, Command Staff College Marine Corps University, 2076 South Street, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico, VA, 22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 13	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

Introduction

So we turned to the guerilla and the sea of people in which he lived. A steel gauntlet had closed on the Main Force and forced him into the mountains, but we could not - nor did we wish to - do this to a people. The guerilla had somehow to be strained out of the mass of the populace. This called for strange, unprecedented tactics for groups of fighting men. It required a gentler touch, the sensitive feel of a velvet glove.¹

During the Vietnam conflict, senior Marine Corps leadership recognized the need for a strategy oriented on guerilla fighters vice uniformed forces. United States Marine Corps Lieutenant General Lewis Walt identifies in the quote above his solution to this need in his book Strange War, Strange Strategy; his theory remains as pertinent today as it was in the Vietnam jungle. As the United States finds itself embroiled in the Global War on Terrorism, the Marine Corps should look to the past to find effective methods of combating the current enemy threat. The Combined Action Program (CAP)² evolved from the circumstances highlighted in the opening excerpt; the program proved effective during the Vietnam War, and commanders should implement its widespread employment in current operations such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

¹ Lewis W. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy*, (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1970), 77.

² The term "CAP" can refer to the "Combined Action Program" as well as the "Combined Action Platoon". For the purposes of this paper, "CAP" will connote the Combined Action Program unless otherwise stated.

Background

The Marine Corps has gained invaluable experience fighting guerilla forces throughout its history, and has achieved great success executing counterinsurgency operations because of its ability to adapt tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) to unconventional conditions. The Marine Corps' development of the CAP during Vietnam is one such example of its ability to adjust TTP when confronted with irregular circumstances.

As had been the case in previous wars, the administrations in power during the course of the Vietnam struggle, as well as the majority of military leadership, believed that the principles of massed firepower and attrition were the keys to winning the war. As a result, the United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), which was responsible for United States military policy, operations and assistance in the Republic of Vietnam, endorsed search-and-destroy operations.

Contrary to the search-and-destroy strategy sanctioned by MACV was an alternate theory supported by senior Marine Corps leaders. They supported engaging the Vietnamese people in a grass roots campaign aimed at acquiring the general population's support; Marine Corps leadership believed that this 'populace' approach was essential to success in the conflict. The Marine Corps had learned the importance of the local populace, as well as the limitations of massed firepower and attrition warfare,

while fighting guerillas and facing insurgencies from 1915 until 1934 in places such as Nicaragua, Haiti and Santo Domingo during the Banana Wars. Consequently, during the initial onset of the Vietnam conflict many Marine Corps leaders relied on this knowledge, and held the conviction that the backing of the general population, not massed firepower or attrition, was the key to success.

In his article, "Combined Action Program: Marines' Alternative to Search and Destroy," James Donovan quotes Lieutenant General Victor Krulak, who served as Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific (1964-1968). LtGen Krulak was a leading proponent of the grass roots tactic, and said:

It is our conviction that if we can destroy the guerilla fabric among the people, we will automatically deny the larger units the food, taxes, intelligence, and other support they need. At the same time, if the big units want to sortie out of the mountains and come down to where they can be cut up by supporting arms, the Marines are glad to take them on, but the real war is among the people and not among the mountains.³

LtGen Krulak recognized that the Marine Corps had the ability to destroy large units in open warfare and welcomed the opportunity; however, more importantly, he realized that the enemy was unlikely to accommodate such a course of action, and, therefore, employment of a different strategy was necessary.

³ James Donovan, "Combined Action Program: Marines' Alternative to Search and Destroy," *Vietnam*, Vol. 17, Iss. 2 (August 2004): pg. 26, 7 pgs, *Social Sciences - ProQuest Military Collection*, ProQuest (24 January 2005).

Another significant Marine leader that advocated the theory of winning over the populace was LtGen Walt. LtGen Walt served as Commanding General, III Marine Amphibious Force (III MAF), from 1965 until 1967, and was responsible for all United States military activity in South Vietnam's I Corps.⁴ In the summer of 1965, Capt John J. Mullin, Jr., a staff officer with Third Battalion, Fourth Marines, made a suggestion of carrying out a strategy centered on increasing local security.⁵ The III MAF Commander was intrigued. LtGen Walt subsequently directed the implementation of this new initiative, and the CAP was born.

Implementation

The basic idea behind the CAP consisted of combining a squad of Marines and a Navy Corpsman (twelve - fourteen personnel) with a platoon (thirty - thirty-five personnel) of Vietnamese Popular Forces (PF). The PF were a poorly trained and ill-equipped militia force that provided security to the hamlet from which they came. Unfortunately, the PF received little support from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) despite the fact that the mission they served was essential to defeating the guerilla insurgency. The Marines brought expertise in small unit tactics, advanced communications, and substantial fire support to the PF. In return, the PF provided

⁴ I Corps consisted of the five Northern provinces of South Vietnam.

⁵ Walt, 105.

intelligence, manpower, and knowledge of the culture and local area. The newly created combined force referred to as Combined Action Platoons worked, ate, slept, and over time, fought and died together.

As T.P. Schwartz articulates in his article, "The Combined Action Program: A Different Perspective", there were a multitude of reasons behind the establishment of the CAP. These included the need to increase soldierly qualities of the PF; to gain acclimatization for the terrain, culture and mode of operations of the Viet Cong (VC); and to earn the trust of the populace. Furthermore, "underlying the concept was clear recognition of the fact that no counterinsurgency could succeed unless the people could be protected."⁶ The Marine Corps recognized that the CAP would provide the local populace with the security needed to gain its allegiance, and would subsequently deny the insurgents their support base. The programs methodology was sound and the results would prove impressive.

Effectiveness

Understanding the fundamental successes in Vietnam of the CAP and translating those successes to the current operating environment are the essential take aways of the United States' experiences with the program. As Schwartz contends, "The CAP

⁶ T.P. Schwartz, "The Combined Action Program: A Different Perspective," *Marine Corps Gazette*, Vol. 83, Iss. 2 (February 1999): pg. 63, 10 pgs, *Social Sciences - ProQuest Military Collection*, ProQuest (24 January 2005).

was an innovation that was usually successful in depriving insurgent access to villages, in reinforcing the fighting ability and resolve of local Vietnamese popular forces, and in engendering goodwill among many villagers to the Marines."⁷ Furthermore, LtGen Krulak documents the most impressive and pertinent effect of the program in his book First to Fight when he states, "no village protected by a combined action unit was ever repossessed by the VC."⁸

Despite the great successes achieved by the CAP throughout its duration, it could not effectively turn the tide of the Vietnam War. There are several reasons why. Most importantly, the program was unable to alter the outcome of the conflict because of limited implementation. Even at the program's height, it was not able to influence enough of the country's populace. Lieutenant Colonel Raymond Damm supports this claim in his article "The Combined Action Program: A Tool for the Future":

[The Program] reached its culmination of implementation just as America began to exit Vietnam. In 1970 the CAPs achieved their goal of 114 units just in time to begin shutting them down for troop retrograde back to the United States. The apex of the program was achieved after the American resolve about Vietnam had plummeted to its nadir.⁹

⁷ Schwartz, 63-72.

⁸ Victor H. Krulak, *First to Fight*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984), 199.

⁹ Raymond C. Damm, Jr., "The Combined Action Program: A Tool for the Future," *Marine Corps Gazette*, Vol. 82, Iss. 10 (October 1998): pg. 49, 5 pgs, *Social Sciences - ProQuest Military Collection*, ProQuest (24 January 2005).

Secondly, MACV never embraced the CAP and instead adhered solely to its search-and-destroy approach to the war. This caused unnecessary burdens on the Marine Corps, such as limited force numbers¹⁰; a condition which contributed to some of the shortfalls the program encountered during its existence.

Although the CAP did not alter the outcome of the Vietnam War, it proved effective as evidenced by the aforementioned results, and it positively influenced the scope of one of America's most studied engagements. The effectiveness and experiences gained in regards to the program are substantial; thus, the program's applicability to the current war on terrorism is worth evaluation.

Applicability

Although the fronts of the Global War on Terrorism are markedly different from those faced during the conflict in Southeast Asia three decades ago, numerous similarities exist. Like Vietnam, the campaigns the United States is currently fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq also require a grass roots approach.

In a war requiring such an approach, the United States Marine Corps' Small Wars Manual correctly argues, "Tolerance, sympathy, and kindness should be the keynote of our relationship

¹⁰ Allocation of additional Marine personnel to back-fill the units that provided participants for the CAP did not occur. This had a direct impact on the readiness of those units and caused variations of the selection process over time.

with the mass of the population.”¹¹ The United States actively promotes this principle as evidenced by the abundance of humanitarian aid and civic action provided to the Iraq and Afghan populations. While the United States has made tremendous efforts towards this end, security for the people, specifically in Iraq, remains elusive.

The CAP, if implemented properly in current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, would contribute to affording security (a necessary provision of a viable government); that security would subsequently gain the loyalty of the inherent populations. LtCol Damm relates a correlation from the past that supports this assertion. He contends that establishing Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam resulted from the realization that the South Vietnamese government had lost the loyalty of its people because of its failure to provide constant security. The Marine Corps understood that the people’s support was essential and that to regain that support it needed to provide the most basic of needs, security.¹² Recognition that the people are the center of gravity in this war is imperative. Their fidelity and allegiance is a necessary precursor to victory. Therefore, it is necessary to exhaust all means to earn their commitment.

¹¹ U.S. Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1940), 32.

¹² Damm, Jr., 49-53.

Employment

The thought of utilizing past strategies, specifically the CAP, to achieve victory in current engagements is not an epiphany. The Marine Corps, realizing the value of this program, has instituted the training and implementation of forms of the CAP in existing operations. Units commanded by the First Marine Division, slated to deploy to Iraq for Operation Iraqi Freedom-II (OIF-II), received basic orientation to the program as part of pre-deployment training; furthermore, establishment of a Combined Action Platoon was a standing task for all infantry battalions.¹³

Third Platoon, Company G, Task Force Second Battalion, Seventh Marines (TF 2/7), was designated as a Combined Action Platoon, and applied the CAP in the Al Anbar Province of Iraq. In a short period, the unit effectively trained over 400 personnel of the 503d Battalion of the Iraqi National Guard (ING) in basic combat skills. More importantly, it successfully executed combined operations, created a core-training cadre within the 503d, and amplified local security.¹⁴

¹³ P.C. Skuta, "Introduction to 2/7 Combined Action Program (CAP) Platoon Actions in Iraq", 2004, http://capmarine.com/cap/CAP%20Iraq/Introduction%20to%202_7%20CAP%20Actions%20in%20Iraq.htm> (16 January 2005), 1.

¹⁴ Jason Goodale and Jon Webre, "The Combined Action Platoon in Iraq: An Old Technique for a New War", 2004, http://capmarine.com/cap/CAP%20Iraq/2_7%20CAP%20May_Sep%2020041.htm> (16 January 2005), 1-5.

Those that employed the program summarized its success and pertinence effectively:

In three short months a small group of Marines had stood-up an ING battalion, conducted joint operations against the enemy, and created a training program that had been adapted by the Iraqis as their own. . . . The leadership was completely confident the mission was worthwhile.¹⁵

Given the results of this CAP endeavor, and the potential it holds, it is valid to apply the program on a wider scale.

Conclusion

On 1 May 2003, while standing on the flight deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln, President Bush declared an end to major combat operations in Iraq. In essence, what had ended at that time was the conventional war that the United States had prepared for throughout the Cold War and the latter portion of the 20th century. What remains is far more substantial and will have far greater implications.

The CAP employed by the United States Marine Corps in Vietnam proved highly effective in combating unconventional threats similar to those now faced in Iraq and Afghanistan. LtGen Walt summarized the contribution of the CAP appropriately and offered a fitting prediction, "Of all our innovations in Vietnam none was as successful, as lasting in effect, or as

¹⁵ Goodale and Webre, 5.

useful for the future as the Combined Action Program."¹⁶ The results of the CAP were a commitment and trust fostered between the local populace and United States forces; in turn, this denied the one thing that an insurgency needs to survive - popular support. Current operating environments demand the same resolution.

¹⁶ Walt, 105.

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